



A Publication of the Idaho Watchable Wildlife Committee and Idaho's Nongame Program

In This Issue . . .

Feeder Favorites Page 1

New License Plate Page 3

End of an Era Page 4

Thank You Page 5

Events Page 6

The Idaho Watchable Wildlife Committee is comprised of the following agencies and organizations:

U.S. Bureau of Land Management

U.S. Forest Service

Idaho Department of Parks & Recreation

Idaho Audubon Council

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Idaho Department of Commerce

Idaho Department of Transportation

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Idaho Department of Fish and Game

*Photo above: Pine siskins, another little brown bird, flock to the feeders. IDFG
Photo right: Oregon junco. Gary C. Will*

Feeder Favorites— Little Brown Birds

by Vicky Runnoe, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Salmon Region

Many of the birds we enjoy seeing at our feeders attract our attention by their beautiful colors or bright personalities. Who can resist the swashbuckling attitude of a flock of raucous evening grosbeaks or the soft beauty of goldfinches in their winter dress? But our feeders also provide the opportunity to get an up-close look at a number of species that often fall into a nebulous category called “little brown birds.”

This moniker is most frequently applied to the sparrows and their relatives. These birds make up the family *Emberizidae*, a large group composed of 49 species. Included with the sparrows are the familiar juncos and towhees. These ground-dwelling birds lead secretive lives often preferring brushy habitat where they find cover while searching for seeds and insects. While most members of this family are not active feeder visitors, several are commonly seen at feeders throughout the winter. Spring and fall bring the possibility of several other sparrow species to our feeders as well.

By far, the most common member of the sparrow family is the dark-eyed junco. Often called snowbirds, these dapper gray sparrows are a year-round resident in Idaho. While summer usually finds them nesting at higher elevations, the shorter days of autumn bring juncos down into lower elevation areas and we begin to see them at our feeders.

The dark-eyed junco is actually a group of five subspecies. All of them are primarily gray with pale bellies and pink bills. In addition, the outer tail feathers are white, a field mark usually seen when the junco flies. In Idaho, the Oregon junco seems to be the most common subspecies. These attractive juncos have a dark hood and bib that contrasts with their chestnut back, buff belly and pink to rusty-brown sides.



Gary C. Will

continued on page 2

FEEDERS

Juncos have the distinction of being the most common bird seen at bird feeders across North America. Data gathered from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Project FeederWatch show that juncos are present at 80% of all bird feeding sites. They seem to prefer smaller seeds such as millet, hulled sunflower seed, and cracked corn.

If you are hosting a flock of juncos, you are hosting a group of birds that will spend the winter together. As with many bird species, order in the flock is determined by a dominance hierarchy beginning with adult males holding the top positions and young females at the bottom of the pecking order. Dominance is constantly tested and it is easy to observe aggressive encounters between flock members at your feeders.

Another sociable sparrow is the white-crowned sparrow. The white-crowned sparrow gets its name from its boldly black-and-white striped head. This field mark along with the species large size make them a standout among other "little brown birds." Young birds-of-the-year can be distinguished from their elders by their tan and rusty head stripes. In fact, these stripes play an important role in the flock dominance hierarchy of this species. Those birds with the brightest stripes have the highest status within the flock.

In Idaho, resident white-crowned sparrows usually remain on their territories year-round. However, birds nesting in central and northern Idaho tend to migrate, forming flocks that are most commonly seen in the southern half of the state during the winter. These flocks establish communal territories that the wintering birds return to year after year. Feeder watchers in central and northern Idaho can expect to see these migrants visiting their feeders as the birds make their way to and from the winter territories. Some of these migrants are very faithful to particular feeding sites and will return to them during migration each year. Feeder watchers report that mixed seed and millet are favored by white-crowned sparrows.

In stark contrast to the social juncos and white-crowned sparrows is the song sparrow. These birds tend to maintain their territorial boundaries throughout the year and remain fairly solitary, often seen alone or occasionally in groups of two or three at feeders. Since many song sparrows do not migrate, year-round territorial defense provides continued access to good food sources including feeders. Being generalists, song sparrows will take advantage of just about any type of seed offered, scratching it from the ground beneath feeders.

Appropriately enough, song sparrows get their name from their beautiful song, which has also earned the species the nickname of "silver tongue." They are frequently one of the first birds to sing in the spring. And brushy riparian habitats



White-crowned sparrow

Gary C. Will

may be filled with song on an early spring day.

Song sparrows definitely meet the "little brown bird" description. They are brownish overall with considerable streaking over much of the body. This streaking comes in just about every variation of brown imaginable from rusty-brown to gray-brown to chocolate-brown. The streaking on the breast usually forms a brownish spot or button, which can

be a good field mark. Also, these birds have two wide dark patches on either side of the chin. These malar stripes look rather like moustaches and give the song sparrow a rather jaunty expression. Since twenty-nine subspecies of song sparrow are recognized, geographical variation in plumage is great.

The last member of the sparrow family that commonly visits feeders is the spotted towhee. Idahoans transplanted from the eastern United States will remember this bird as the rufous-sided towhee. Several years ago this species was split into two species, with the spotted towhee in the western U.S.

Spotted towhees are beautiful long-tailed sparrows with black hoods, backs and tails, rusty orange sides, white bellies, and ruby-red eyes. Females look similar to males, but may have more brownish heads and necks. Young birds-of-the-year will look much like the adults, but will have gray-brown eyes. Spotted towhees are year-round residents in part of Idaho, but migrate out of higher elevation areas to form flocks with resident towhees in winter. As such, some feeder watchers will host spotted towhees all winter while others will see them only during the spring and fall migrations.

Since towhees are birds of brushy areas, they tend to be rather shy at feeders unless cover is readily available. When they do feed, they use a vigorous "hop-and-scratch" feeding style to find seeds dropped by other birds. Feeding towhees often send dirt flying as they scratch and can often be found in the underbrush just by listening for the rustle of leaves as the birds search for food. Mixed seed and millet seem to be preferred by towhees.



Spotted towhee

Gary C. Will

Several other species of sparrow may use feeders in Idaho especially during migration. The chipping sparrow spends the summer nesting in our state and occasionally visits feeders in the spring and fall. These lovely little sparrows sport rusty-red caps with a white stripe above the eye and a black stripe through the eye. They also have a gray rump patch, and are uniformly grayish underneath with a brown back streaked by darker brown. Similar but slightly larger is the American tree sparrow. This species also has a rusty cap, but the face is gray with a rusty stripe through the eye. In addition, the tree sparrow has a rusty back with dark streaks and a uniformly gray breast and belly with a single black spot in the center of the breast. Tree sparrows also tend to be found in flocks and use feeders only during extreme cold or during storms. Both species are generalists and will eat a variety of seeds.

If you do find yourself hosting a handful of “little brown birds” at your feeder, make sure to have a good field guide at hand. Identifying sparrows can be a challenge at times, but is rewarding nonetheless. With a little patience and some practice you will be able to identify each species and can take pleasure in knowing the true identity of those “little brown birds.”

Bald Eagle Day 2003

Bald Eagle Day
2003 Jan 25,
9am—4pm, at the
Idaho Shakespeare
Festival, 5657 Warm Springs
Avenue, Boise. The Golden
Eagle Audubon Society invites
you to view live raptors,
presentations, wildlife
education room and wildlife
watching all day. Free
admission. For more
information, call 208/334-4199.



Show Off Your Support for Fish and Wildlife

A trophy cutthroat trout can soon be yours for the catching! All you have to do is “cast” yourself down to the local auto license office. In early 2003, the cutthroat license plate becomes the newest wildlife plate for avid anglers and outdoor lovers. The cutthroat, Idaho’s official state fish, joins the elk and bluebird as symbols of Idaho’s wildlife.

The majority of the proceeds from the trout plates support Idaho Department of Fish and Game’s Nongame, Endangered, and Watchable Wildlife program. The Nongame program is responsible for managing and conserving Idaho’s 470 nongame species. It is funded almost exclusively by donations and wildlife license plates sales. “The funds are used to conduct surveys and for monitoring programs to better understand the current status and trends of nongame species,” says Acting Nongame Program Manager, Charles Harris, Ph.D. “Examples include annual breeding bird survey routes, as well as bat, reptile and amphibian surveys.” The funds also support university faculty and graduate student research. Additionally, it provides wildlife education and materials for the MK Nature Center and Project Wild teacher workshops.

A small portion of the trout plate proceeds support the non-motorized boating program managed by the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation. The program is focused on developing, improving, and maintaining popular put in and take out points used by non-motorized boaters accessing rivers and streams throughout the state.

A wildlife plate costs \$35. Renewal of a wildlife plate costs \$25. Over the past eight years (1993-2002), the program has raised approximately \$2.7 million for the Nongame, Endangered, and Watchable Wildlife program. Currently, more than 37,000 Idahoans have chosen wildlife plates for their vehicles. “The wildlife plate allows Idahoans who may not hunt or fish, but who care about wildlife resources, to contribute to the Nongame program for conservation and management of nongame, endangered, and watchable wildlife species. Sportsmen and women who buy wildlife plates in addition to their hunting and fishing licenses and tags are contributing to all of Idaho’s wildlife,” explains Harris. The new cutthroat plates will be available at your local auto license office starting in 2003. If you have questions on wildlife plates, please call the Idaho Fish and Wildlife Foundation office at 208/334-2648.



The End of an Era

Wayne Melquist has served the Idaho Department of Fish and Game for 17 years, and has held the position of State Nongame Wildlife Manager for the entire period. This many years dedicated to Idaho's wildlife is more than just a job, it must be called a passion. On January 3, 2003, Wayne officially retires from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, but certainly won't retire from his passion of wildlife. We would like to acknowledge Wayne's accomplishments with making the Nongame, Endangered, and Watchable Wildlife Program what it is today.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game's Nongame, Endangered, and Watchable Wildlife Program (Nongame Program) was formally created in July 1982. The Department had long been interested in the welfare of nongame wildlife when the Idaho legislature established the state's first tax checkoff on the 1981 income tax form. It was the funds derived from the checkoff that allowed the establishment of a legitimate nongame wildlife program. State taxpayers contributed a portion of their refunds to the conservation of species not hunted, trapped, or fished (more than 80 percent of Idaho's wildlife species).

Melquist took the job as State Nongame Manager in September 1985. Donations to the checkoff were declining, compounded by additional checkoffs on the income tax form. It became clear that checkoff revenue would not be sufficient to sustain the Nongame Program, much less allow it to grow. Melquist worked with the Southwest Region's Citizen Nongame



Wayne smiles with Cecil Andrus during the signing of the bluebird plate legislation.

Diane Ronayne

problem of how to adequately fund the program and meet ever-increasing demands continues. Idaho is not alone in its quest to find new ways to fund nongame programs, and Melquist always strived to find new funding opportunities.

From a one-person program in 1985, the Nongame Program has grown to include nongame biologists in all Fish and Game administrative regions. In the Headquarters office, the Nongame Manager is assisted by 2 staff biologists, a grants coordinator, and 2 wildlife technicians (including the Windows to Wildlife Newsletter Editor). During his tenure, the Nongame Leaflet Series was expanded from 3 to 13 leaflets. Several "where to go wildlife watching" booklets were produced, including the Idaho Wildlife Viewing Guide. And this Windows To Wildlife newsletter was launched to keep supporters informed about nongame and activities of the Nongame Program. Working with a volunteer citizen committee, Wayne also took on the task of creating what is now the MK Nature Center.

Wayne Melquist plans on joining the University of Idaho to continue his passion for wildlife through research. Good luck with all your retirement endeavors and thank you for building Idaho's Nongame, Endangered, and Watchable Wildlife Program to what it is today. Wayne, you will be missed, but your work and dedication to Idaho's wildlife will be seen and felt for generations. Thank you.



Bruce Haak, IDFG



Bruce Haak, IDFG

Wayne helps with the peregrine hawkbox atop KeyBank in Boise.

THANK YOU

Thank You to All Contributors

Our sincere thanks go to all supporters of the Nongame Program, financially or otherwise. Without your contributions, the Nongame Program could not conduct critical research, hold wildlife viewing events, or publish this newsletter. The following people made direct donations, purchased or renewed a wildlife license plate, or let us know of their tax checkoff donation. These lists represent only newsletter subscribers who have returned a subscription form between September 1 and November 30, 2002, and marked the contributor box. Many subscribers not listed here have contributed generously and Idaho's nongame wildlife thanks all of you.

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Kathleen Jennings-Mills

\$100

Judy Ferguson

All-Bird Conservation Initiative Workshop

March 19-21, 2003, Grove Hotel, Boise, ID

This workshop will provide orientation to the all-bird conservation initiative which will include the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, the Intermountain West Joint Venture, State All-Bird Planning, the four major bird initiatives, funding programs, and other current bird conservation programs. In addition, the workshop attendees will develop on-the-ground strategies for integrated conservation through the states All-Bird Committee and All-Bird Plans. The intended audience includes state and federal agency personnel, non-governmental organizations, Audubon members, interested birders, and wildlife enthusiasts in general. For more details, contact Rex Sallabanks in the Nongame Wildlife Program (208/334-2920; e-mail rsallaba@idfg.state.id.us).

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Winchester Lake State Park Events

Winter is a busy time around Winchester Lake. Make sure to visit for clinics, nature walks, and workshops.

Pre-registration is recommended. For more information, please call the Winchester Lake State Park office at 208/924-7563, Monday through Saturday between 8 AM and 3 PM.

January 18, 22, 25 –Ice Fishing Clinic – Who better to learn the in’s and out’s of ice fishing from than area fishing legend Wayne Roberts. (Ladies Day is Jan 22) Join Wayne to learn the basics of ice fishing, from jigs & rods to where & how to cut your fishing hole. Go home with the fish and maybe even some fishing success secrets. There are morning (9-12pm) and afternoon sessions (1-4pm). Sessions are limited to 10 people, so call today to register!

February 8—Snowshoe Walk—Do you like to get out and tromp around in the snow? Join the Park Naturalist for a fun Snowshoe nature walk, learning how to identify trees, catch a glimpse of area mammals or their tracks, and enjoy a little birdwatching.

February 22—Tracking Workshop—Have you ever wondered what made those footprints in your yard? Join the Park Naturalist for an informative workshop and nature trek to become acquainted with the tools of tracking and learn to identify wildlife by their footprints and other signs. Snowshoes are recommended, but not necessary to be a part of the fun.

March 8, 22—Ecology Walk—Just because it’s getting colder doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy a quite walk in the woods. Enjoy the walk while learning how the forest changes during winter.

April 5—Bat House Workshop—Learn about bats, their importance in our community, and then construct a bat house, which offers bats a place to find shelter. Workshop is free to those who leave the bat house for the park to hang, or \$6.50 donation if you take the bat house you make home.

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